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ABSTRACT

New American Schools (NAS) is a coalition of several partners dedicated to supporting innovative, successful schools throughout the country. The partners include the Education Commission of the States, the New American Schools Development Corporation, the seven NAS design teams, the RAND corporation, and various school districts and states. This publication presents findings of a study that examined the reactions of parents, teachers, and students to the various principles and practices included in the New American Schools designs. Data were derived from a telephone survey of 2,700 parents in 7 of the cities and states in which the NAS effort was initially concentrated (San Diego, California; the state of Kentucky; the state of Maryland; Cincinnati, Ohio; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Seattle, Washington) and from focus group interviews with parents, teachers, and one group of students. Findings indicate that parents and teachers are enthusiastic about the basic ideas of education-reform proposals; are hesitant to believe that ideas for reform can become a reality; have different views about when teachers' professional development should happen and who should pay; believe that student evaluation should combine a variety of approaches; agreed that accountability for student success rests on parents and students as well as educators; and believe that parental involvement is necessary for educational improvement. Additionally, parents rely on teachers and students for information about education; desire change, but disagree sharply over how much and what kind; believe that public schools are on the wrong track, even in their own communities; and want higher standards, while teachers are less sure. (LMI)

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LISTEN, DISCUSS AND ACT:
PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' VIEWS ON EDUCATION REFORM

June 1996

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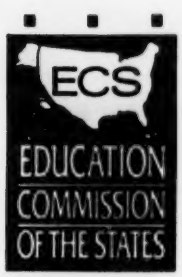

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The ECS offices are at 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202-3427.

The New American Schools Development Corporation, established July 8, 1991, is a bipartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization formed by American corporate and foundation leaders. Its mission is to help communities throughout the United States improve their public schools by implementing school improvement designs that the New American Schools' design teams have developed.

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INTRODUCTION

Education improvement efforts are under way in virtually every city and state in America. From innovative ideas at a local school to reform networks that span the country, people are working to improve the way schools teach and increase what students learn. Test scores and anecdotal evidence are beginning to show that these changes are helping students learn more and learn better. But there is little information about how these changes are perceived by those closest to children — teachers and parents.

That is why the Education Commission of the States (ECS), in collaboration with New American Schools, commissioned parent surveys and teacher and parent focus groups in several cities across the country. ECS — a national nonprofit organization that works with state policymakers and educators to improve education at all levels — is working with New American Schools and the seven education improvement designs it supports to help all students achieve at higher levels.

New American Schools is a coalition of several partners dedicated to supporting innovative, successful schools throughout the country. These partners include ECS, the New American Schools Development Corporation (a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization founded in 1991 to fund the research and development of high-quality education improvement designs), the seven New American Schools designs teams, the RAND corporation, school districts and states that have committed to putting new school improvement efforts in place on a wide scale and hundreds of schools across America. ECS is helping communicate about the New American Schools effort and other promising education reforms, as well as linking governors, legislators, state board members and other state leaders to people in schools and districts working to improve the education system.

It is clear that any communication about changes in education reform efforts must start by listening to the people most affected by the changes. ECS commissioned the research firms of Belden & Russonello and Research/Strategy/Management to examine reactions of parents, teachers and others to the various principles and practices included in the New American Schools designs, and to provide insights into the ways schools, districts and states can best communicate about the reforms as they embark on new programs.

In the summer and fall of 1995, a telephone survey was conducted with 2,700 parents who were registered voters in seven of the cities and states where the New American Schools effort is concentrating its initial work — San Diego, California; the state of Kentucky; the state of Maryland;

Cincinnati, Ohio; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Seattle, Washington.

And in late 1995 and early 1996, focus groups were held with parents and teachers in several school districts in Kentucky; Baltimore, Maryland; Cincinnati, Ohio; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Memphis, Tennessee. ECS and Belden & Russonello worked with local district staff to tailor these groups to local needs. Each locality held between three and five focus groups, each featuring either teachers or parents (and, in Pittsburgh, one group of students), selected to represent a broad section of people within a certain race, income bracket or school.

This report relates what those teachers, parents and students had to say. The report closes with recommendations for ways to build public and political support for education improvement. The insights and ideas of the people most involved in education show that listening, discussing and acting together can lead to the result all parties want most — improved education for all our students.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

► ***Parents and teachers are enthusiastic about the basic ideas of education reform proposals.***

- Approval is overwhelming for the principles and practices that form the core of New American Schools and other reforms, such as teaching the basics plus more complex skills, learning by doing, increasing parent and community involvement, and providing more local control of schools. More than eight out of 10 parents surveyed give a thumbs-up to many of the strategies put forth by education reformers.
- In focus groups, teachers who had experience teaching with new education strategies are enthusiastic about the basic ideas and felt they were improving education for their students.

► ***Parents and teachers are hesitant to believe these excellent ideas for reform can become a reality.***

- Despite the support for the basic tenets of New American Schools and other education reform efforts, many parents and teachers in the focus groups express strong doubts that such improvement can take hold in their schools.
- When asked whether the reforms can work in their own schools, parents and teachers cite lack of commitment from district leadership, the condition of society outside the schools and a belief that these reforms, like countless others in the past, will come and go. As a result, they sense that these ideas, no matter how good, will have difficulty finding a lasting home in their own schools.

► ***Parents rely on teachers and students for information about education.***

- When there are important changes happening in schools, district communications offices often focus attention on the media, hoping that parents will get the word through the daily paper or the nightly news. But this survey shows that when parents need to know what is happening in their children's schools, they turn first to the two sources most often neglected in a school's communication efforts — teachers and children.
- Almost nine out of 10 parents surveyed say they rely on teachers for information. More than eight in 10 rely on children.
- Fewer than seven out of 10 parents say they rely on newspapers for education information, and fewer than half rely on television and radio to learn what is happening in schools.

Basic Elements of New American Schools Designs

- Learning by doing
- Teaching the basics plus more complex skills
- Involving parents effectively in their children's education
- Giving educators more authority and encouraging professional development
- Making sure that materials, including books and computers, are in adequate supply
- Finding financial resources for schools, including seeking private-sector support
- Helping parents get children ready to learn before they get to school
- Involving the community to improve education and help assure safety in the schools
- Emphasizing character development and social responsibility
- Using site-based councils for local decisionmaking

► ***Improving education requires parental involvement.***

- Teachers and parents alike agree parent involvement is a crucial part of children's education and a key aspect of any education reform effort. But, as with other concepts in education, the idea of parent involvement sounds better in the abstract. In the survey, only four parents in 10 express strong willingness to volunteer in a public school classroom.
- In focus groups, teachers and parents frequently mention barriers to effective parent involvement, such as time pressures from work and family, and a general feeling that parents are unwelcome in the classroom. The good news is that teachers and parents, especially those involved in education reform efforts, are working hard at finding new ways to involve parents in their children's education.
- Parent involvement means more than being present in the school. In the focus groups, some parents cite getting children up on time, fed, dressed and ready for school as ways to be involved and supportive of their child's schooling. And many parents who are unable to be present in schools take an active role in school-related activities at home, such as monitoring and helping with children's homework.

► ***People want change, but disagree sharply over how much and what kind.***

- There is broad agreement that public schools need to change, but opinion is divided over how and how much. A slim majority of parents (52%) in the target cities think schools need only minor tuning, while four in 10 (41%) call for a complete overhaul.
- These parents are deeply divided over what direction the changes should take. Just over one-third wants to adopt the best of the new and innovative methods to improve learning. Just under one-third wants to go back to the "tried-and-true" basics of education, and the remaining one-third thinks there should be a combination of the old and new methods.

► ***Parents believe public schools are on the wrong track — even in their own community.***

- Traditional wisdom holds that most people think their local schools are fine; it's "those other" schools that need to be improved. But more than half of the parents in this survey say they believe schools in their own community have gotten off on the wrong track; fewer than four in 10 think their local schools are headed in the right direction.
- Teachers fare better than schools in general; more than half of parents surveyed grade teachers "A" or "B" on overall

performance. Only one in 10 marks teachers' performance as low as "D" or "F." In fact, caring teachers are one of the factors frequently cited by focus-group participants as an example of good things in the schools.

- But, while parents say two to one that schools are doing a good job teaching the three R's, only three in 10 of the parents surveyed think schools are doing a good job teaching problem-solving and disciplined work habits.

► ***Parents want higher standards, teachers are not as sure — and most think expecting every child to meet them may be too much.***

- Parents and, to a lesser degree, teachers, believe schools do not expect enough of students. Six out of 10 parents surveyed say public schools set their standards of performance too low, while only three of 10 find the standards just about right.
- Teachers, on the other hand, often focus more on *meeting* high standards than on *setting* them. Many teachers feel students all too often come to the classroom lacking the home background essential for success.
- Many parents and teachers alike have serious reservations about expecting *all* children to achieve at high levels. They worry that, whether because of family and social factors or "innate ability," not all children can excel in school and expecting them to do so is unrealistic and unfair.

► ***Accountability for student success rests on parents and students as well as educators.***

- Holding teachers and administrators accountable for student performance is one of the most popular ideas in education reform, but aspects of it were troubling for parents and teachers in virtually every focus group. There is general agreement that there should be some rewards or consequences for teachers and schools when their students excel or fail in large numbers.
- Focus group participants agree there are too many factors outside educators' control to hold teachers fully responsible for student achievement. Both parents and teachers in the focus groups believe strongly that parents and students also hold a large share of the responsibility for students' academic performance.

► ***Teachers' professional development is important, but there is disagreement about when it should happen and who should pay.***

- In the focus groups that explored professional development in detail, parents and teachers agreed that teachers, like other

professionals, should have continuing opportunities to develop and hone their skills. They also agree those opportunities should go beyond "inservice days." Teachers need time to collaborate with their colleagues, and to explore a variety of ways to improve their teaching methods, such as working together in teams and providing support for less experienced teachers.

- In focus groups that explored the issue, when to schedule professional development opportunities and who should pay for them received mixed responses. Teachers are more likely than parents to say professional development should be made available to them during the course of their regular working day or year (as opposed to adding days during summer) and that the school or district should fund them.

► ***Finding out what students know and can do requires a variety of approaches.***

- As schools change the way they teach children, they also are changing the way they evaluate their progress. While both educators and parents have been frustrated trying to combine traditional standardized tests with newer ways to evaluate children's knowledge and abilities, the focus groups and survey results make it clear that parents and educators believe a combination is the best approach.
- In the survey, parents rank the value of portfolios, public displays of student work and standardized testing nearly evenly (33%, 31% and 32%, respectively). Both parents and teachers in the discussion groups point out that standardized tests are efficient and allow for comparison, while qualitative measures can be more meaningful and fair. In the final analysis, many of these parents and teachers think it is useful to use a variety of approaches to gauge the range of a child's abilities and knowledge.

DETAILED RESULTS

This section has more detailed information on the results cited in the Summary of Results section. Charts of selected survey data follow the Methodology section at the end of this report.

"I'd see the children in groups and discussing among themselves, the teacher walking around observing and interjecting a question. I think that a room that is dead silent is like wandering minds. The children need to be involved constantly." — *Philadelphia mother*

► ***Positive response to education improvement ideas***

Parents in the survey overwhelmingly support adopting some or all of the reform elements tested in this study. More than eight out of 10 parents surveyed (85%) say they would approve of their local public schools using some or all of the following practices:

- Hold students to high academic standards linked to statewide standards
- Make parent and community involvement a key component of the education experience
- Teach students using projects that connect their studies to real-life situations
- Teach students to work independently
- Teach students to work in groups
- Measure learning by regular, standardized, multiple-choice tests
- Measure learning by keeping a portfolio of student work
- Measure learning through public displays of what students know and can do
- Involve national education experts in changing the schools
- Involve the business community in changing the schools
- Make connections with other schools and communities working on similar efforts.

"I feel some sense of success when I see my children working together, helping each other to learn, peer tutoring. And not only are they working together, but they're working together willingly. And they are taking pleasure in what they're doing and they show an interest in what they're doing. And they ask me, 'When can we do this again?'" — *male teacher, Philadelphia*

The prospect of increased short-run education costs fails to diminish enthusiasm for reform. Support drops from 85% to 81%, with most of the shift coming from those parents only somewhat committed in the first place. The prospect of extra costs increases parents' overall opposition to reform ideas from 8% to 14%.

As with the survey, parents and teachers in focus groups are enthusiastic about the prospect of their school adopting some or all of the key components of New American Schools and other reforms. (For a list of these key components, please see the box on page 3.)

Parents in the focus groups have clear ideas about what makes a good school. When asked to imagine what a classroom with learning going on looks like, the ideas offered by parents include hands-on activities, active

class participation, small group interaction and opportunities for children to teach fellow classmates.

Many of the characteristics discussed in the ideal classroom situation of the parents' groups also are mentioned in teachers' groups. The teachers in the groups offer such ideas as flexibility in curriculum, fewer time constraints, active participation and cooperation among students, more hands-on activities, more computers, and extra assistance in the form of volunteers and team teaching.

"Our school is doing one of the New American Schools programs. We're going to write our own curriculum. We're supposed to get new technology. Basically, the goal is to raise student learning. We're now assessing with portfolios, hands-on type of work, because it is more applicable to the real world. But it's a lot of work and it's very foreign to what we've all seen before, so we're kind of in a state of confusion and a learning, training type process." — *female teacher, Memphis*

► ***Doubt that education reform can last in the schools***

Despite the enthusiasm for most of the basic education improvement ideas, three tenets central to New American Schools receive very mixed response from parents and educators — the premise that all children can learn at high levels, setting high academic standards and holding educators accountable for student achievement. And, even more problematic, parents and teachers alike express strong doubts that such improvement can take hold in their own schools.

Teachers in the focus groups who work in schools that recently have implemented changes sometimes are the most critical of the reform process — not because of the basic ideas, but because of the implementation process. Lack of commitment from district leadership, factors outside the schools and a belief that these reforms, like countless others in the past, will come and go convince people that these ideas, no matter how good, will have difficulty finding a lasting home in their own schools.

However, as focus groups in Cincinnati and Memphis show particularly well, teachers already involved in the new designs being adopted reveal an encouraging enthusiasm for most of the central elements of the reforms, such as team teaching, new assessments, hands-on learning and the increased use of technology. Their counterparts in schools not involved in reforms, who have not had the same exposure to these ideas, are less enthusiastic about the changes. Therefore, the experience of working in a school making significant changes appears to be proving that the new ideas really do work and can significantly improve students' education.

"The changes are very exciting. It's a neat place to be at this time in education, because it's not what it was 10 years ago." — *female teacher, Memphis*

Teachers in many focus groups note limitations within the system for bringing about change, citing time constraints and their lack of professional autonomy as barriers to achieving higher levels of learning. Clearly, many of these barriers are chronic problems that require institutional and political change.

► ***Where parents turn for information***

The source of education information parents most often rely on is teachers; 88% of parents surveyed said they rely on teachers for information about their children's education. Teachers are joined at the top of the credibility list by children and other parents, with 83% of parents saying they rely on children and 82% saying they rely on other parents for information about education issues. Only 68% of parents surveyed say they rely on newspapers for information about education, and only 45% rely on television or radio for information about what's going on in the schools. In addition, teachers in focus groups report that their knowledge of education reforms comes mainly from talking with other educators and from personal experience. Clearly, the media has a role to play, but it is not as influential as direct contact.

"So many things come and go and then it comes back as another name. I think, 'Oh, so this is basically what we did a few years ago. We're just calling it this now.'" — *female teacher, Memphis*

The survey also shows that increasing parents' comfort level with education reform is a task that requires input mainly from neighboring communities and local business, with some help from national experts. Three-quarters (74%) of parents surveyed say connections with other schools and communities working on similar efforts in education reform would make them more comfortable with proposals designed to change their schools. Involving the local business community in changes at the school also scores well; 72% of parents surveyed say such involvement would increase their comfort level with education reform efforts. While fewer than half of parents surveyed (45%) say they would be more comfortable with national experts' involvement, this does indicate that such experts have a limited, but important, role to play.

► ***Parental involvement in education***

Making parental and community involvement key components of any proposed change effort are important for the acceptance and success of the reform. There was little variation across the seven survey sites in their support for parental involvement in education reform. However, as with other concepts in education, the idea of parental involvement sounds better in the abstract. When probed, only four parents in 10 express strong willingness to take part in organized parent-teacher activities.

"I think they are learning to be better thinkers, whereas we were learning to do it again and again until we got it right. Justin brought home a little electricity thing where you had the battery. That has thrilled him. He has shown that to his grandfather. I thought, man, this is magic, because we didn't do anything fun like that." — *Eminence, Kentucky mother*

In focus groups, parents mention volunteering as a way to become more involved in their children's education and also as a way to assist with the problem of large class sizes. Other suggestions for parent involvement that came up in focus groups include helping children with their homework, eating lunch with one's child, tutoring after school and working on decisionmaking committees. Teachers in focus groups also rate high parent involvement as very valuable in making school reforms work and say they would support and welcome it wholeheartedly. In Cincinnati, for instance, teachers believe encouraging parent involvement is in large part the responsibility of educators.

"When the parents instill values and let the child know that education is important, they will take that to school and be ready to learn. It shouldn't all be put on the teacher, especially when the teacher has 30-something children in the class." — *Philadelphia mother*

"We as teachers need to motivate our parents to come. This year I videotaped a student project, so my students were excited about open house and I had the highest percentage of parents. That was because I put forth a little bit more effort. I'll often have parents who come to me and say, 'If you ever need anything, give me a call.' Well I don't call and that's not just the parent's fault." — *female teacher, Memphis*

However, while most of these parents support the idea of participating in their child's education, some say it can be very difficult as well. They cite barriers that range from having to work during the school day or meeting times to feeling unwelcome in the classroom. In two focus groups concentrated on low-income parents, the parents often report feeling intimidated by both classrooms and teachers. And many parents are simply too worn out by the demands of work and family to put extra time and energy into the schools.

The absence of parents from the schools should not be construed as a lack of interest and involvement in their children's education. Some parents cite getting children up on time, fed, dressed and ready for school as ways to be involved and supportive of their child's schooling. And many parents who are unable to be present in schools take an active role in school-related activities at home, such as monitoring and helping with children's homework.

Similar to accountability, encouraging parental involvement often is viewed as a team effort on the part of parents, teachers and students. The parents' role is to take the time and effort to become involved in their child's education; the teachers' role is to make the parents feel welcome at school and provide convenient and appropriate ways parents can become involved; and the students' role is to encourage their parents to attend events and meet with teachers.

► ***Nature and extent of school change***

There is broad agreement that some kind of change in the public schools is needed, but opinion is divided over how much change there should be. A slim majority of parents surveyed (52%) believe only minor tuning is called for. Four out of 10 voters (41%) call for a complete overhaul. Few believe schools should be left alone.

Parents surveyed react well to the idea of some changes made in education. They respond favorably to the words "education reform" (60% favorable; 22% unfavorable). Those parents most favorably disposed to the idea of education reform include:

- Voters who approve of previous education reform attempts (75% respond favorably to the idea of "education reform")
- Voters in Pittsburgh (71% favorable impression) and Cincinnati (68%)
- African-Americans (70% favorable impression)
- Voters who think schools should change in new and innovative directions (69%).

But, while nearly everyone agrees that some change in our public schools is called for, there is no agreement over what shape the change should

take. Nearly one out of four parents (36%) want to adopt the best of the new and innovative methods to improve learning. Almost that many (34%) want to accommodate both basics and new methods. And nearly three out of 10 (28%) want to go back to the "tried-and-true" basics of education.

"I like basics and they have their purpose in the classroom, but the kids need more experience inside the classroom that they can't get out of basics. And I like that flexibility to work with that." — *male teacher, Philadelphia*

► *Rating the public schools*

A majority of parents surveyed (55%) feel that things in their public schools have gotten off on the *wrong* track. Interestingly, parents were more optimistic about their communities (57% feel their communities are on the *right* track) than the state of their schools.

Teachers specifically fare better than schools in general on measures of overall performance. A clear majority (57%) of voters grade teachers' overall performance above average ("A" or "B"). Three out of ten (28%) give them a "C." Only one out of ten (11%) marks teachers' performance as low as a "D" or "F." In focus groups, teachers are viewed as both a positive and negative; when asked what is good about schools, people often say "good, caring teachers." When asked what is bad about schools, people often mention "bad teachers who only are there for the money."

"My school is not getting the benefits of 21st Century money or the funds for the NASDC schools. We're trying to become innovative, but we're held back because of the funds and also the student population. Many of our top students are moving out to the optional school, and we're left with the average or the below average. It's a struggle for us to do some of what we need to do." — *female teacher, Memphis*

Schools' teaching of the three R's receive good marks, with a two-to-one ratio. Not so for skills involving problem solving or disciplined work habits; 29% of parents give schools a "D" or "F" on teaching students how to use information to solve real-life problems, and 36% give negative marks to the teaching of disciplined work habits.

In many of the focus groups across different locations, parents, teachers and students cite violence and disorder as major problems with the schools. Other problems cited in focus groups include:

- Lack of funding, adequate materials and technology
- Overcrowding and lack of staff
- Emotional and domestic problems affecting the performance and behavior of children
- Inequalities within districts.

► *Standards*

One aspect of education that most voters agree on is the failure to set standards high enough. Six out of 10 (60%) believe public schools set their standards of performance too low. Conversely, three out of 10 (33%) find performance standards just about right. In focus groups, most participants agree that raising expectations for student performance is desirable. However, the idea that all children can achieve at high levels generate some difference of opinion in the groups.

"I don't think we expect enough from the majority of our children now. And I think we could realistically set high standards. If everybody knows what you expect, and everybody works toward that, then you can get there." — *Eminence, Kentucky mother*

In the focus groups, there is a core of individuals who endorse the concept of setting high expectations and who have faith that children can learn at high levels given the right resources. They recognize the value of setting high standards, commenting on the stimulus that high expectations should have naturally on children's learning, self-esteem and achievement.

However, many focus group participants have serious doubts about how realistic or desirable it is to set high expectations for *all* students. First is the belief that all children cannot, in fact, learn at high levels. The assertion that they can goes against much experience on the part of parents and teachers, who say all students are individuals who are different from one another. Some parents and teachers also are concerned that setting standards or expectations at high levels puts undesirable pressures on students. And others worry that setting a standard that all children can achieve means the standards will be set too low.

Educators in the focus groups often focus more on *meeting* high standards than on *setting* them, and many are skeptical about the feasibility of achieving high standards. They lay the blame at the feet of parents and society — teachers believe students who enter the classroom all too often lack the home background that is essential to success.

"I don't think there's any doubt that we all believe that all children can learn, but whether or not all children can take physics or pass Algebra II is another thing. Are you expecting the same thing from all children? No, this isn't going to work. But if you expect that all children can learn, can progress, can move ahead, then certainly." — *female teacher, Maryland*

In one location, different racial groups see standards differently. For instance, the African-American parents in the Maryland focus groups give higher academic standards the top rating — as the most important of all the elements included in new approaches to schooling. Six out of 10 give it the number one spot. They also are somewhat more inclined to believe all students can learn at a higher level. The white parents believe higher academic standards should be set, but they rank other elements of education improvement efforts as more important than higher standards.

► *Accountability*

How to hold teachers and administrators accountable for student performance was a difficult issue for virtually every focus group in which the concept was discussed. For both teachers and parents, objections to an accountability plan have more to do with the criteria for evaluation than with whether it should be done at all.

For instance, many parents and teachers fear judgment of student performance will be based on fallible standardized tests and on change in a single academic year — both indicators they find inadequate. Some teachers suggest keeping the same group of students for two or more years, a circumstance under which many feel they could be fairly evaluated.

Acceptable accountability plans need to be flexible and to stress not only penalizing educators who are not doing their jobs, but also identifying teachers who may need assistance. When teachers suggest plans for holding educators accountable, they include consideration of the population and circumstances under which the educator is teaching, assessments that measure students' improvement over the course of at least a year, and evaluations by peers, administrators, parents and students.

Along with the idea of accountability comes rewards and sanctions. While parents and teachers support sanctions for under-performing teachers that ranged from wage stagnation to loss of jobs, they also mention the need to help those teachers who need assistance. Training and mentoring are two ideas participants suggest to help teachers whose students are not performing to standards. The focus group participants support rewards for educators such as salary increases, bonuses, more decisionmaking authority and choice in teaching assignments.

These parents and teachers alike believe parents should have a major share of the responsibility for children's success or failure in school. While getting a handle on enforceable consequences for parents and students is difficult, parents even more often than teachers endorse the idea of sanctions for parents who fail to take responsibility for and contribute to their children's education. A few even endorse such steps as fines or jail time for parents.

Focus-group participants often suggest a number of measures that *promote* parent and student accountability. Calling parents at work and requiring parents to spend time at school all are endorsed as good ways to hold parents accountable. Some teachers also suggest requiring parenting courses and workshops for some parents. Recognition of parents' efforts also is endorsed as a good way to encourage parents to make sure their child goes to and is prepared for school.

Students themselves are not exempt from accountability. Teachers and parents in the groups consistently say students should be held accountable for test scores, grades, homework, attendance and behavior. While some teachers think summer school, if taken seriously, is a good way to provide consequences for students not meeting expectations, others suggest implementing consequences for students before the end of the year or semester, when there is still time for students to improve for that year. Acceptable rewards for students include promotion, graduation and honors.

"In any job, you're held accountable or you're out the door. I'm not going to go to an auto mechanic who messed up my next door neighbor's car. And I don't think that I should send my kids to a school which didn't teach my neighbor's kids last year." — *Memphis father*

"There are too many variables. Are the children coming to school? Are the parents holding them to doing their work? Nowadays, people move every year. How can you hold the school accountable for children you just received?" — *female teacher, Maryland*

"It's very important for parents and teachers to teach that (students) are ultimately responsible. The buck stops with the student." — *Memphis father*

"My husband has to have a license to drive a boat. He has to go to Cincinnati every four years for a week, and no one pays for that. — *Pittsburgh mother*

"Teachers are like any other profession. I am valuable to my company, and it is up to them to make sure that I perform at my highest level. We as taxpayers own the schools. We should make sure teachers are given the most valuable resources possible for them to enhance their talents." —*Memphis father*

One child does not do good on tests, and another child may not do good on oral presentation. But if you use three things, then that child has a chance of passing and passing with good grades." — *Maryland mother*

► ***Professional Development***

In the focus groups that explored professional development in detail, parents and teachers agree that teachers, like other professionals, should have continuing opportunities throughout their careers to develop and hone their skills. They also agree that those opportunities should go beyond "inservice days" to time to collaborate with their colleagues and a variety of ways to learn about the newest and best ways to teach, including working together in teams and providing support for younger, less experienced teachers.

However, when to have professional development and who should pay for it received mixed responses. In Memphis, for instance, almost everyone agrees taxpayers should pay for professional development. However, this was not the case in Pittsburgh, where many parents believe teachers should pay for their own professional development.

Parents in both Pittsburgh and Memphis are strongly against their children missing more school for teachers' professional development and would prefer it be held in the summer or after school. The idea of children missing school or being taught by a substitute is rejected by parents, who believe this penalizes the children. The teachers, however, did not feel as strongly as the parents about the timing of professional development, but did lean toward holding it during their regular working day or year.

► ***Assessment***

There is no consensus among survey respondents on a single way to measure student performance. In the survey, parents rank the value of portfolios, public displays of student work and standardized testing nearly evenly (33%, 31% and 32%, respectively).

In focus groups as well, it is clear that parents and teachers see a role for both quantitative and qualitative measures of education outcomes. While they are quick to criticize standardized and classic closed-end tests, they also recognize their utility, efficiency and transferability.

Qualitative measures, however, are seen as more intrinsically meaningful and fair. When considered side by side, the ideas of portfolios and student public presentations are judged to be better indicators of learning than are standardized tests.

In the final analysis, many parents and teachers think a combination of standardized tests, presentations and portfolios would be a valid and fair approach. They particularly like the combination approach because it allows children who struggle with one form of testing to show what they know using another one.

Recommendations for Building Public and Political Support for Education Improvement

Based on the results of the survey and focus groups, the Education Commission of the States offers the following recommendations for people involved in education at the school, district and state level to communicate about their education efforts and build public and political support for improving education.

► ***Listen to people first, talk later.***

When people say their schools have gotten off track, they often talk about safety, order, quality of facilities and attitude of educators. While those may be a far cry from the innovative curriculum or new standards many educators are excited about, most community members will not be interested in innovations until their more pressing concerns are addressed. Therefore, communication efforts must begin with identifying and prioritizing your community's specific concerns. Meetings, one-on-one conversations, focus groups or surveys can be useful. When you answer people's questions first and take steps to solve the problems they have identified, they are much more likely to be interested in the other things you have to say. Remember that listening is an ongoing process, not something to be done once at the beginning of a major change. Set up a regular process for listening to your community and responding to what you hear from them.

► ***Expect to fail if you do not communicate well with teachers.***

The experience of schools and districts across the country clearly shows that if teachers are not informed and active participants in the process, reform efforts will fail. The survey results give another reason to keep both teachers and students well-informed every step of the way; parents who want to know what is going on at the school ask teachers or their child. If those two groups are not informed, parents will not be informed either. And uninformed people are often disgruntled and frustrated; they may assume they do not like what is happening in their schools. In fact, if they knew what was going on and why, they more likely would be supportive and understanding.

Teachers who are satisfied with the basic ideas of a reform effort may have enormous frustrations with the way the effort is implemented. Give teachers a voice in the process — treat them as partners with the school and district in the reform. Also, let them know up front how much time any changes will involve, what the effect on their work will be and what they can expect to happen when. As the focus groups show, both teachers and parents who are enthusiastic about reforms are not confident that

the district would support them. Seeing the superintendent at the schools, hearing the superintendent and the board talk about the reform effort, and knowing there is financial support for the reform all can help instill confidence that these valuable changes will be able to find a lasting home in the schools.

► ***Make involving parents and the community a top priority.***

These results make it clear that, to bring about lasting improvement, any reform effort will have to find new and better ways to involve parents in their children's education. Schools can start by listening carefully to parents to determine what keeps them from the classroom, expanding the range of parent volunteer opportunities and recognizing the fact that parents who are not in schools and classrooms still can be highly involved in and supportive of their children's education. It is also important to include teachers and students in efforts to increase parent involvement. Some parents want to have a voice in the way schools are run — do not overlook this means for getting parents involved, but be sure when you do that they can play a meaningful role in the goal-setting and evaluation of the school.

In focus groups, parents and teachers suggest that children's excitement and accounts of what goes on in school, and one-to-one conversations with teachers, are the most informative way to find out how children are progressing. The survey results make it clear the media have a role to play, but the media are not as important as direct contact. To build public confidence in reports about the progress public education is making, educators may want to rely on direct, animated communication among teachers, parents and students. This, combined with reporting test scores or other quantitative results, should provide a more effective means to build public support. It's clear that increasing opportunities for parent-child-teacher communication will add to your success in solidifying support.

► ***Be clear about what it means to set high standards for all students, and what it will take to meet them.***

Survey and focus group results strongly suggest that parents and teachers are more inclined to support a goal of *improving* success for all students rather than buying into the notion that "all children can learn at high levels." They believe the goal of having all students achieve at stellar levels is counterproductive and unrealistic. In other words, *higher* standards for all receives more support than *high* standards for all. Agendas that include setting high standards also need to spell out clearly who set the standards and what resources (including instruction, materials and time) children will have to support their meeting them.

► ***Show how new ideas enhance, rather than replace, the old ones.***

This research shows that parents and educators are primed for school reform, but they worry the innovations are not feasible or will go too far. They recognize the need for students to go beyond the basics and learn more complex skills, but fear basics are not being taught adequately. They say they want reforms made in their schools, but do not know how to assess the innovations. When you are introducing something new, show how it works with what is already there. For instance, computers will be used more in classrooms, *along with* books and other, more traditional materials. There will be portfolios and other demonstrations of student work, *along with* more traditional standardized tests. Bridge the gap between people's experiences and expectations and the changes being implemented, then show *how* the changes improve learning for students.

► ***Educate parents about the choices available to them.***

New American Schools, along with many other groups and individuals interested in improving education, are working hard to expand the range of choices available for children's education. These results show clearly that no single approach will satisfy all members of a community. But it is not enough simply to have the choices. Effectively improving education for all students means parents must know and clearly understand what the choices are and how to access them. Finally, parents must be shown how they can be involved in decisionmaking when their schools are making changes.

► ***Help parents and other community members understand how students are assessed, and what the results mean.***

If your school or district is using a variety of ways to measure what students know and are able to do, tell people about it! Make sure the language you use is clear, give a variety of examples and show how the different measures work together to add up to a complete picture of a child's or school's progress.

For further assistance with your communications efforts, please contact the ECS communications department; 303-299-3625. We can help supply examples of schools, districts and states that have had successful community involvement efforts, as well as direct you to a variety of resources for building a communication strategy that fits your local needs.

METHODOLOGY

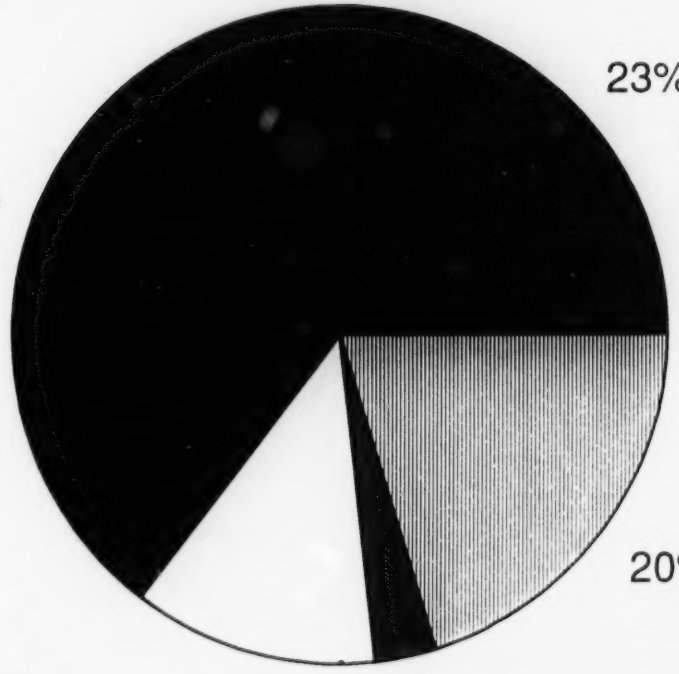
This report presents the findings of a research project consisting of a telephone survey and focus groups. ECS commissioned the research firms of Belden & Russonello and Research/Strategy/Management to examine reactions of parents, teachers and others to the various principles and practices included in the New American Schools designs, and to provide insights into the way school districts can best communicate about the reforms as they embark on new programs.

From July to September of 1995, a survey was conducted with 2700 parents between the ages of 25 and 54 who were registered voters in seven of the cities and states where the New American Schools effort is concentrating its initial work — San Diego, California; the state of Kentucky; the state of Maryland; Cincinnati, Ohio; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Seattle, Washington. Interview subjects were contacted using random digit-dial samples. Each interview lasted approximately 17 minutes and was conducted by a professional interviewer over the telephone. Language specialists were available to handle Spanish-language households, if encountered.

In late 1995 and early 1996, focus groups were held with parents and teachers in several school districts in Kentucky; Baltimore, Maryland; Cincinnati, Ohio; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Memphis, Tennessee. These groups were designed in conjunction with local district staff. Depending on local needs and interests, each group brought together 8-12 parents or teachers (and, in Pittsburgh, students). To ensure that participants were aware of education issues, parents in the groups were recruited who are registered to vote; voted in 1992, 1994 or both election years; have at least one child under the age of 18 in school between kindergarten and 9th grade; and had met with their child's teacher or attended a parents' meeting at the school at least once within the last 12 months.

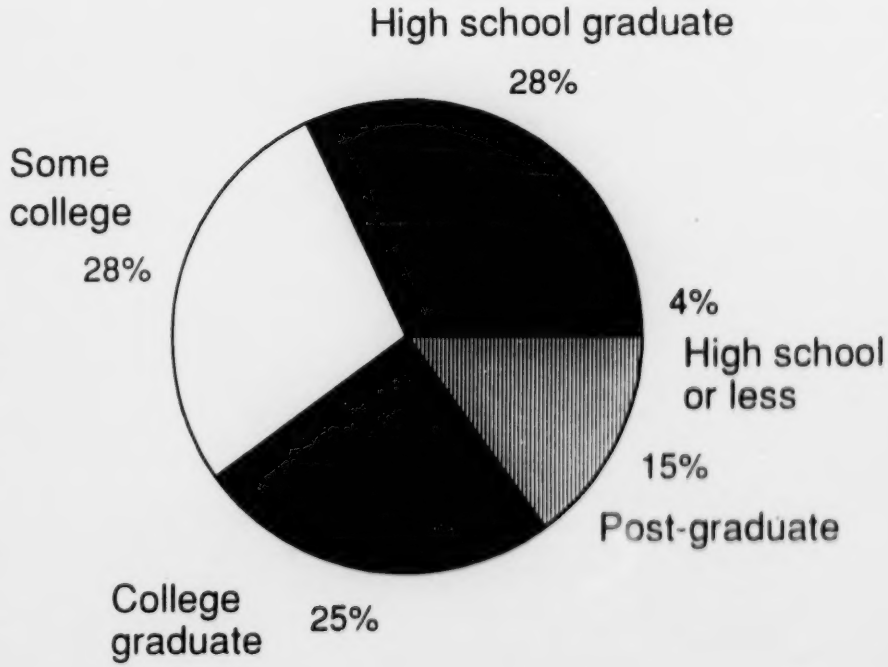
Depending on local needs, groups were segmented by race, income or school. All groups were led by professional moderators; the groups that were exclusively African-American were led by an African-American moderator.

TYPES OF SCHOOLS SURVEY RESPONDENTS' CHILDREN ATTEND

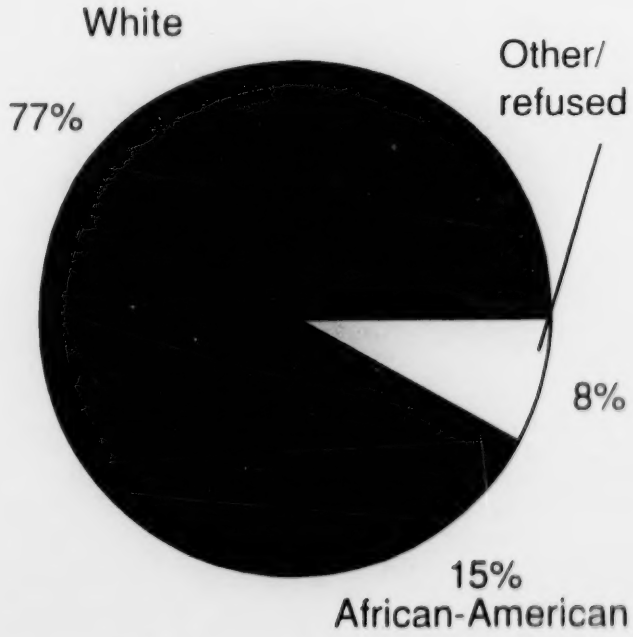


EDUCATION AND RACE/ETHNICITY OF RESPONDENTS

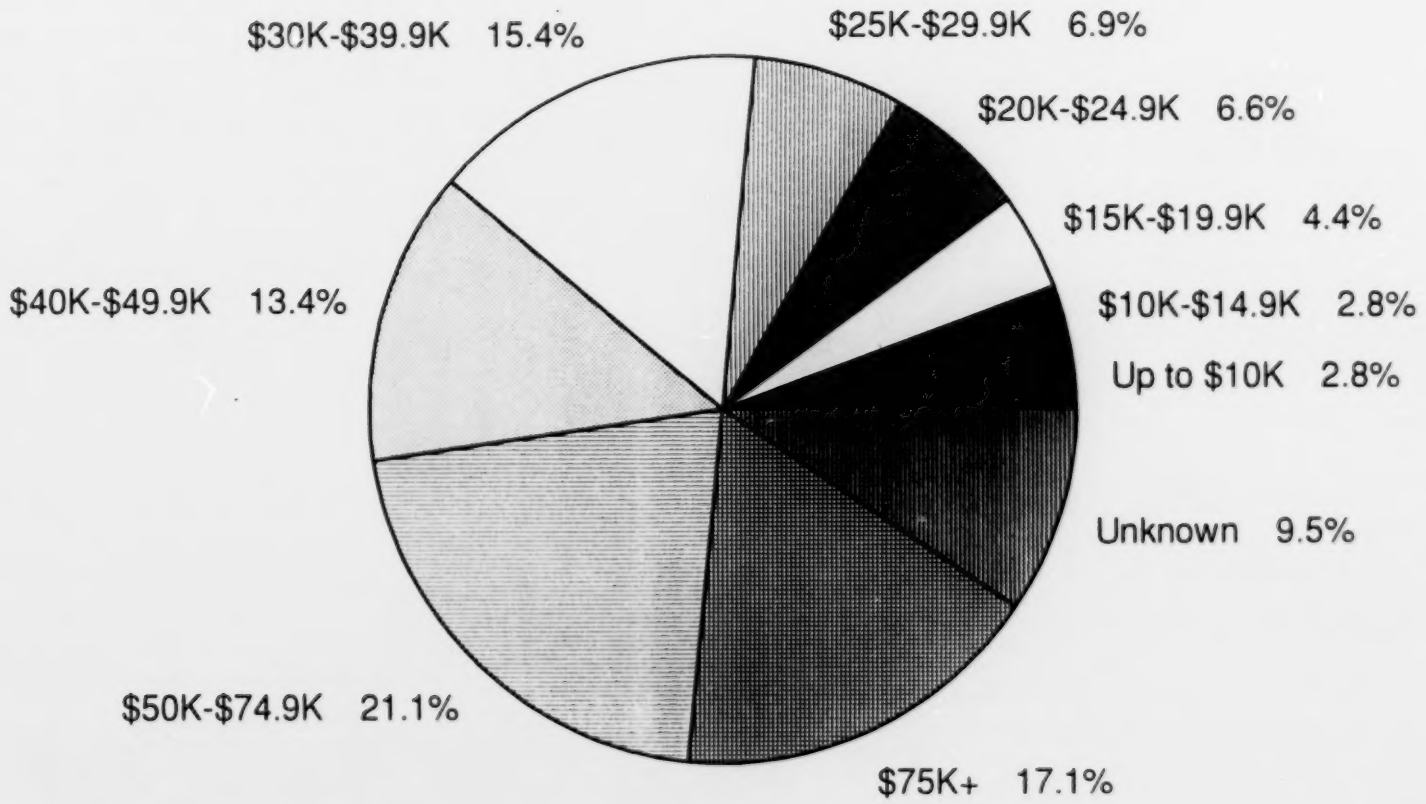
EDUCATION LEVELS



RACE/ETHNICITY



INCOME LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS

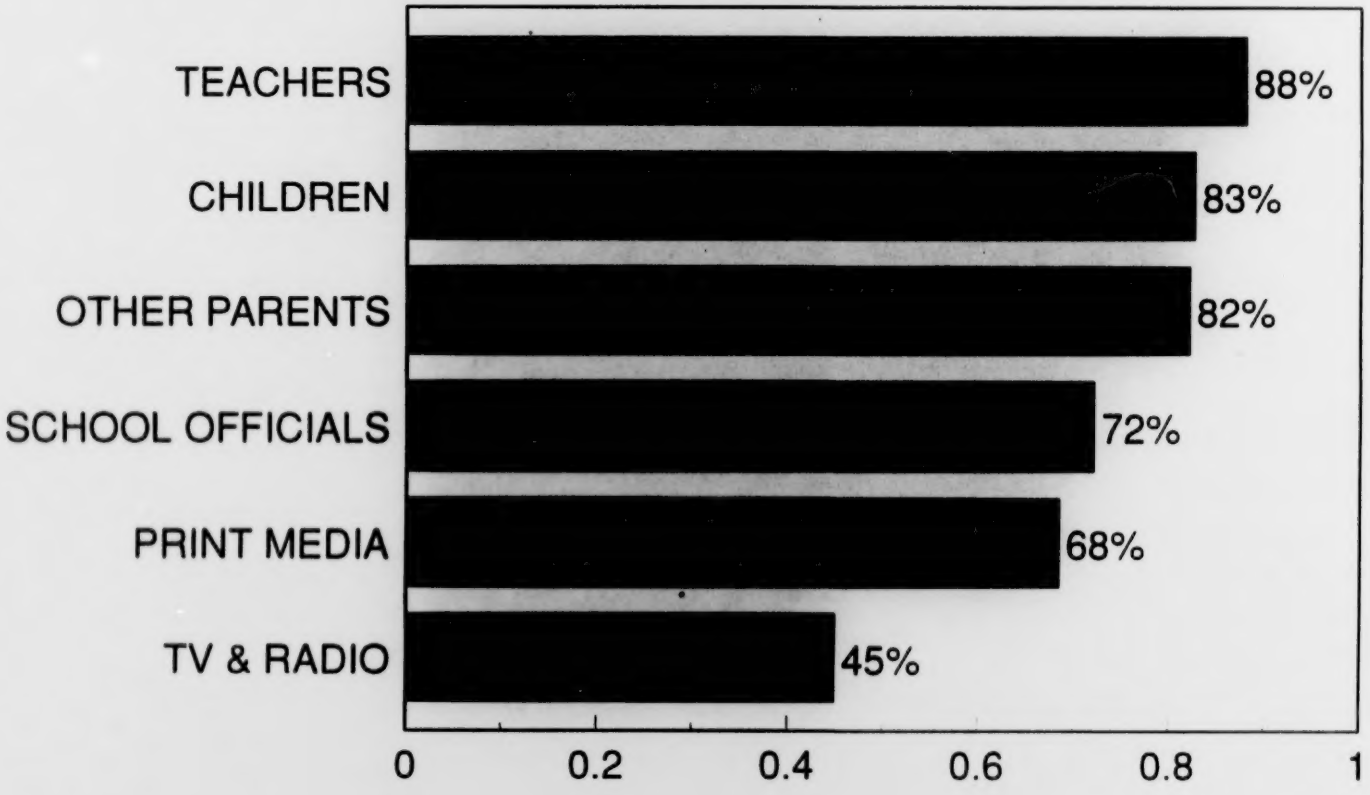


Would you approve of your local schools adopting some or all of these education improvement ideas?

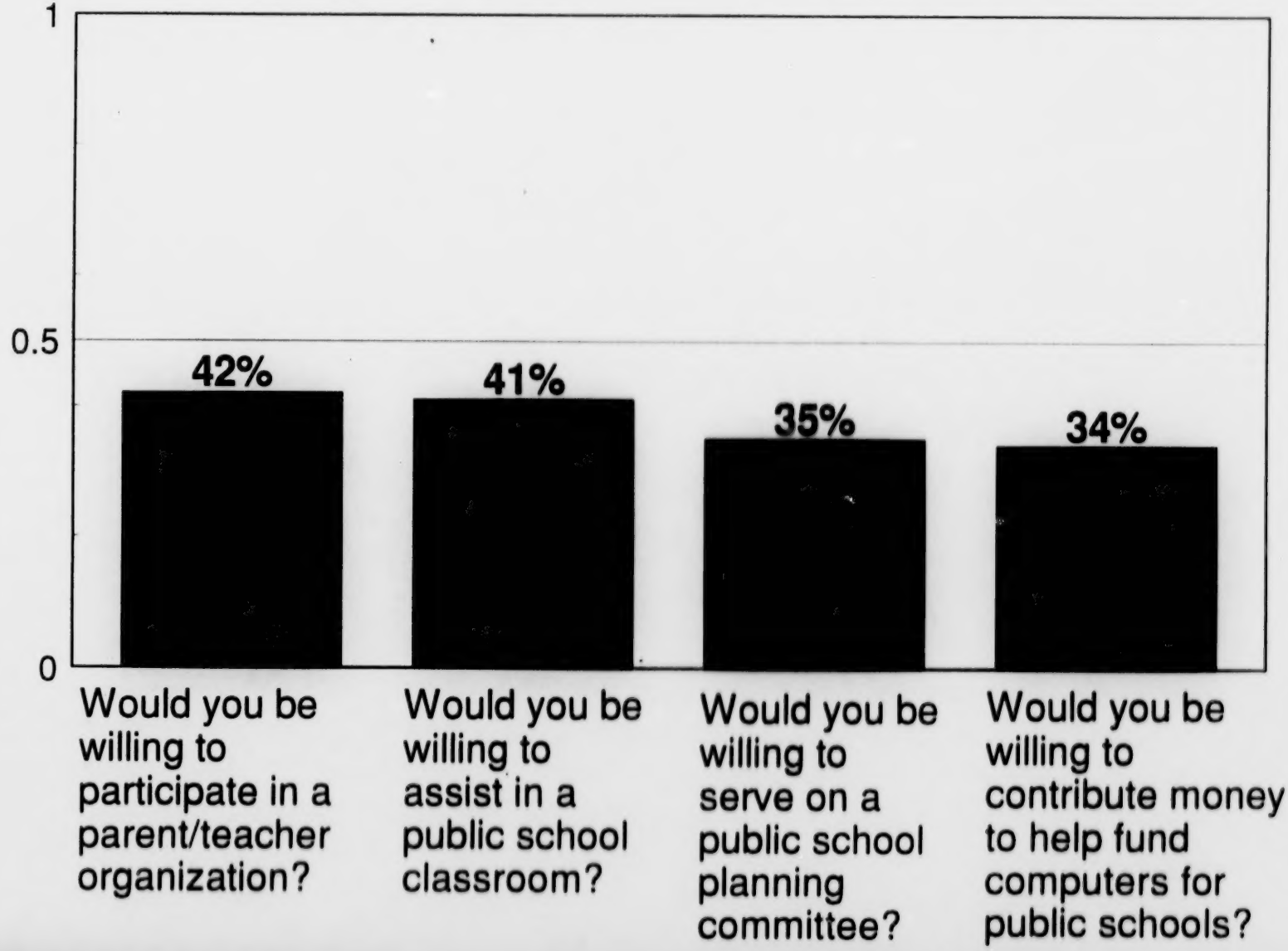
Examples of ideas:

- Make parent and community involvement a key component of the education experience
- Hold students to high academic standards
- Teach students projects that connect their studies to real life situations
- Teach students to work independently
- Teach students to work in groups
- Measure learning by keeping a portfolio of student work
- Involve the business community in changing the schools

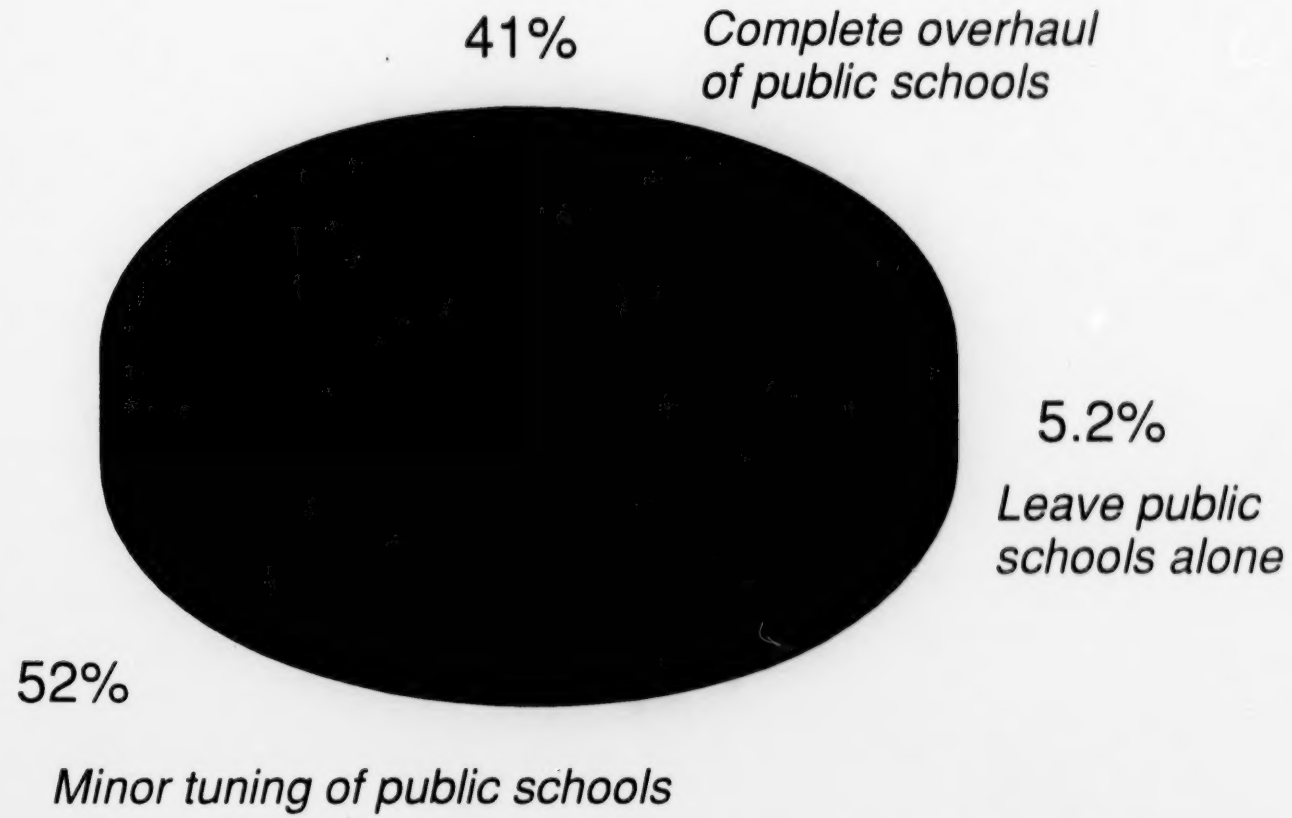
WHO PARENTS RELY ON HEAVILY OR SOMEWHAT HEAVILY AS SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT EDUCATION ISSUES



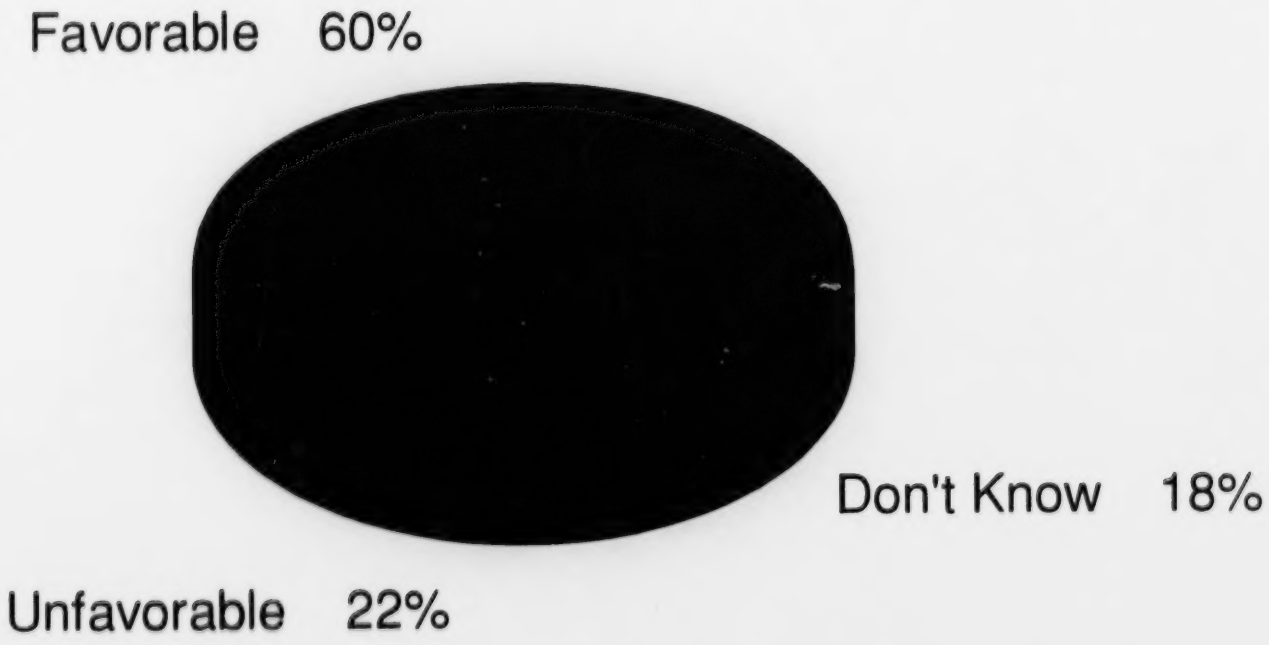
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT


1
0.5
0
42%
41%
35%
34%
Would you be willing to participate in a parent/teacher organization?
Would you be willing to assist in a public school classroom?
Would you be willing to serve on a public school planning committee?
Would you be willing to contribute money to help fund computers for public schools?

Which point of view comes closest to your own?



IMPRESSION OF PHRASE "EDUCATION REFORM"



Which point of view comes closest to your own?

Public schools should adopt best of new/innovative education methods to improve learning

36.1%

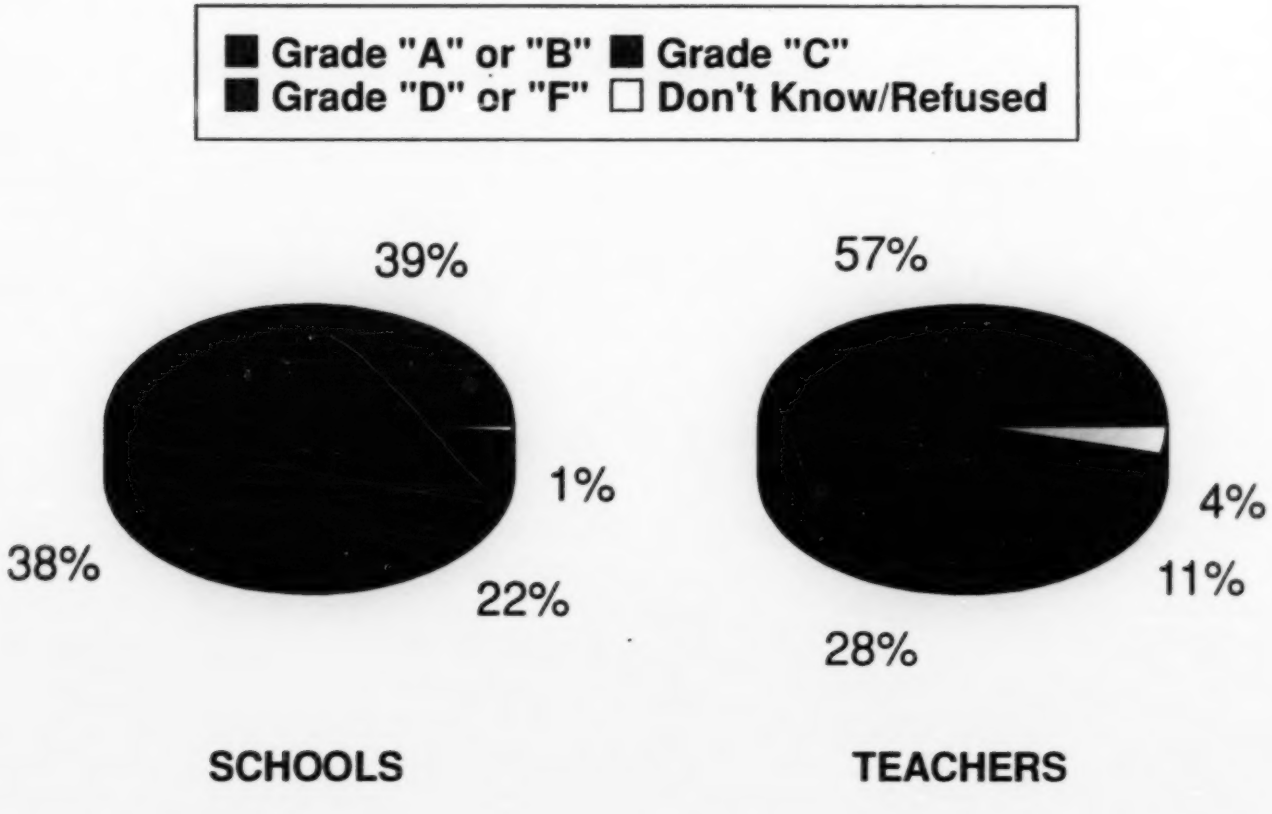
28.1%

Go back to tried and true basics of education

Combination of the two

33.8%

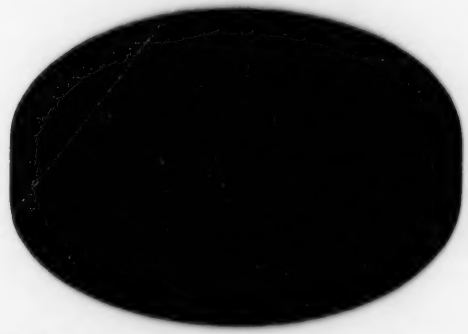
How would you grade schools and teachers in your community?



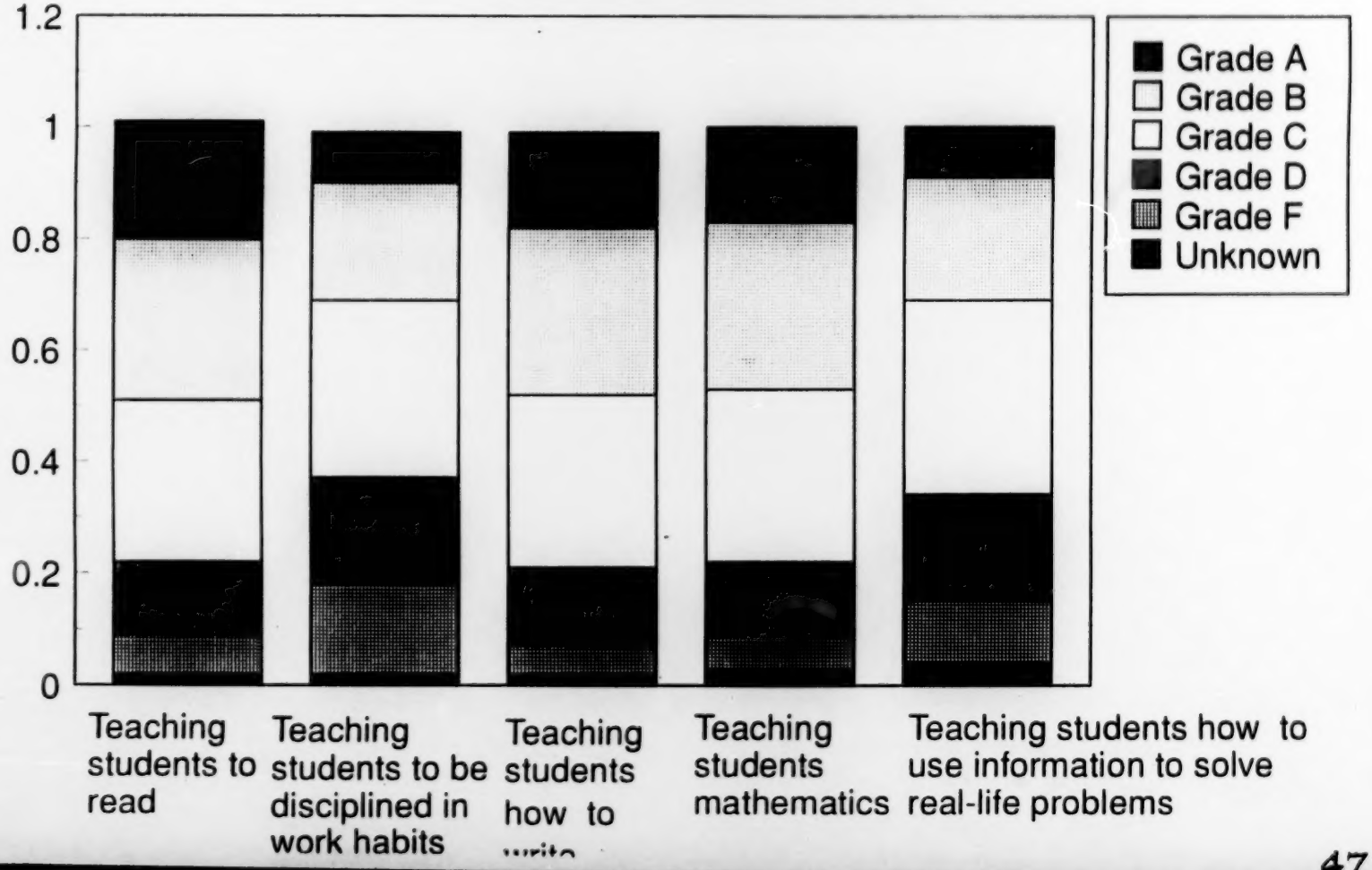
Are things in your community and in your schools going in the right direction or have they gotten off on the wrong track?

OUR COMMUNITY

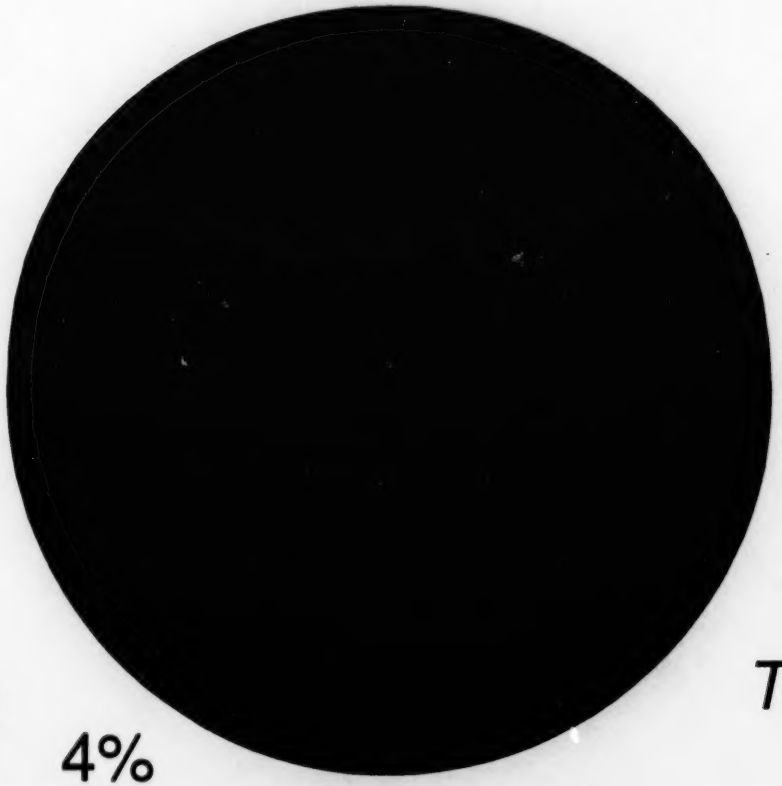
OUR SCHOOLS



GRADING OF PUBLIC SCHOOL PERFORMANCE



In your opinion, do the public schools set their standards of acceptable performance too high, too low or just about right?



Which of these three ways is the best way to measure learning?